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JOHN RUSKIN.

BY PROFESSOR CHARLES WALDSTEIN.

WITH the death of John Ruskin a noble life has ended. His life was, above all, noble in being true to itself. There is a singleness and harmony in such lives which make them stand out as complete and clearly perceptible entities, dramatic types on the world's great stage, to which future ages can always turn back and learn their lesson in clear and striking examples—to be admired and followed when noble, condemned and shunned when ignoble. Ruskin was one of those men who dared to live his thoughts. “And if we should feel that there are inconsistencies in his life, these do not arise from the usual cause of such inconsistency, namely, the discrepancy or contradiction between practice and profession, between the actual course and the theory of life: when mystical, ascetic, and other-worldly preachers shine in the ball-room and speculate on the Stock Exchange; when philosophers, historians and scientists, whose vision penetrates down to the principles of all things, soars over countless ages in the history of nations, and traces the links that bind things animate and inanimate together, crouch before an ephemeral prejudice or fashion of a petty locality; and when economists and social reformers pen the gospel of socialism over oysters and champagne. If Ruskin's life appears inconsistent, the contradictions are to be sought for in his thoughts and theories.”*

But Ruskin has not merely lived his thoughts, he has expressed and perpetuated them in monumental prose; and, apart from his living personality as an example, he stands before us as the writer of thoughts, the man of letters, the philosopher and teacher. And now that death has crowned his life with victory, we are

*See p. 7, “The Work of John Ruskin, etc.,” by the present writer. New York, Harper & Bros.; London, Methuen & Co., 1894.

justified in asking: What will actually live in his life-work, when the memory of his striking personality has faded and the continuous charm of his refined genius can only be recalled by the tradition handed on from the lips of those who knew him? The stupendous versatility of the man, as reflected in his numerous works, makes an answer to this question all the more difficult—whether all his work will equally live, or, if not, what part of it; whether he will live as a writer on the theory of art, or as a critic and historian, or as a philosopher and moralist, or as a writer on social, economical and political questions, or as the founder of the art of observing nature—or chiefly as a great prose poet? Is his lasting greatness to be found in the teacher, or in the poet, or in both combined?

The difficulty which has been felt in the minds of his numerous friends and admirers with regard to the choice of his last resting-place may be permitted to serve as an illustration for the answer I would propose to the question I have raised. The choice lay between Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey and the rural churchyard of Coniston, in the very heart of the English Lakes, where Nature in all her purity and beauty reigns supreme, uncontaminated by the hand of man as he interferes with her serene peace in the endless search for material subsistence. Both these resting-places in death appear to me to indicate clearly the sphere in which Ruskin's work will gain for him immortality. He will ever live in the grateful minds and hearts of the English-speaking world, both as the greatest of prose poets and as the truest exponent of nature's beauty. This, truly, is enough for one man to have attained, for one life to have achieved.

If Milton has rightly defined poetry as "simple,* sensuous and passionate," the prose of Ruskin amply fulfils and illustrates these characteristics. It is the imparting to the human mind of the world without, as well as the world within, by means of language which should be so completely in harmony with the thing described that this very harmony becomes a thing of beauty in itself. But, more than this, the language is not only to be in complete accord with the object it conveys, but it is to respond fully to the harmony of our own feelings and passions, so that the whole

*"Simplicity" here means naturalness, appropriateness and absence of affectation. It is not found, as is so frequently supposed, in plainness, commonness of thought or diction, in the affected and unnatural choice of short Saxon words and short sentences, the inappropriate obtrusion of vernacular phrases.

emotional mood corresponds to the experiences expressed. To do this, it must possess a formal harmony of its own, a completeness and roundness in its sequence and flow which is the soul of poetic beauty in form. This beauty of form is not tied down to metre and rhyme; it also lives in the rounded period of prose, with its even balance of parts, its clear and yet not rigid division, its symmetry as well as its rhythm. This produces what is essential to all true art, namely, the unity of sequence and tone which binds the multiplicity of movement and sound into the harmony of form. The prose of Ruskin fulfils these conditions as does no other, the only exception perhaps being the Bible, from which he learned his art. Whether he describes a picture of Titian or a landscape by Turner, a Gothic cathedral or a Venetian palace, clouds or mountains, a tree, a flower or a blade of grass, we feel that, not only is his description adequate and convincing, but that the object, great or small, which he thus describes, has by its existence almost served a new purpose in that it has furnished the material for the creation of a new literary art—the prose of Ruskin. Nay, even when he is unappreciative and unjust in his disapproval, scathing and grandly vituperative in his contempt, we could not miss the beautiful form in which his passionate and, at the moment, sincere protest is couched. For he has raised us out of the sphere of theory and criticism into the domain of poetry. The balance of our mental attitude has dipped into the regions where Milton, Shelley and Keats are the ruling spirits.

Yet, even poets, who create the brilliant atmosphere of beauty, may send flashes of inspiration to illumine and penetrate to the innermost core of truth. All the more is this the case with Ruskin, who primarily and sincerely aims at truth. Still, his best work, that part of it which will last, lies in the region of poetry. The very strength of our conviction that Ruskin has gained immortality by his work in these spheres must make us mindful of not falsely attributing to him qualities and virtues which, in our belief, he does not possess.

He himself was fond of quoting Mazzini's opinion, that he was the greatest analyst in Europe. It was upon the thoroughness of his philosophical work, the validity of his theories with regard to nature, to life and to art, that he chiefly prided himself. He wished to be regarded as a thinker and a teacher, not as a writer of "fine English," or, as we should put it, as a great poet. Yet, it is

not unfrequently the case that man's estimate of what is *most* valuable in his own work is not borne out by the judgment of posterity.

For my part, I must state emphatically that I do not consider the influence of Ruskin's work as an "analyst" and teacher of the theory of things to have been either deep and effective in his own days, or likely to last in its influence upon the future. The thorough and systematic study of the phenomena of nature, of art and of life, from the point of view of science, which enables us to grasp the "laws" which underlie the phenomena, to detect and to fix in clear and dispassionate language what is universal and essential, as distinguished from what is individual and accidental—these have not been the achievements to which I believe in the future the work of Ruskin will maintain its claim. And I feel convinced of this, not only with regard to those portions of his work where he has ventured into the domain of the natural sciences, or philosophy or political economy; but even with regard to his writings on the theory and criticism of art. These are frequently held up as the works of the supreme master, possessing the most thorough and the deepest insight. Though his best books on this subject—notably, "Modern Painters" and the "Stones of Venice"—contain numerous passages, paragraphs, nay, chapters which give evidence of supreme insight, the most penetrating intellectual sympathy, in which the apprehension of individual facts is most clear and accurate and the grasp of the "general principles" in every region of thought seems most complete, there are wanting in his connected work, on the one hand, a systematic continuity and consistency of thought, and, on the other, that just weighing of evidence, that sobriety of mind which is required for any valid induction. This makes him a most difficult author to refute; as, for every statement criticised, some passage may be found to support the views of the critic and give these, moreover, a beauty of form to which few writers on art can lay claim. But, taken as a whole, his work is distinctly wanting in necessary sobriety of analysis.

Where he is most successful—and this is, no doubt, a most important sphere of criticism—is where there is a call upon his sympathetic imagination, where he is led to appreciate and admire. It is here, when he observes with loving sympathy the works of the great Venetian painters and architects, or the orna-

mental detail of a Northern Gothic cathedral, or the beauty of design and color in the luminous landscape of Turner, that he is at his best. At his hands we can be taught to observe more fully and justly the works that we may have passed over hastily before, and to appreciate qualities that to our uninitiated or unsympathetic eye were hitherto unrevealed. He can teach us to admire.

But we must not always follow him in accepting the reasons which he assigns for admiration, still less must we follow him blindly when he disapproves. There are whole regions of art, expressive of great and admirable peoples and periods, for which Ruskin's poetic temperament has no response and appreciation; and the reasons which he assigns for this disapproval are as fallacious as they are fundamentally unscientific. The golden rule for the reading of his critical works on art would, in my opinion, be: Follow him when he admires; shun him when he disapproves; and examine carefully for yourself when he gives a reason for either admiration or disapproval.

The besetting sin in Ruskin's work as a thinker and teacher is, it seems to me, the same weakness that we find in the intellectual and, perhaps also, in the practical and industrial life of England, namely, *amateurishness*. Though this defect arises, primarily, from the love and appreciation of the objects which one is studying, it implies nevertheless an absence of the thoroughness and schooling, a revolt against the constraint of systematic work and thought and routine. It arises from the repugnance to professionalism and the fear of pedantry; but it leads to the reign of empiricism and the lawlessness of individual effort.

In Ruskin—and his own education and life will amply account for this—it has led to intellectual isolation and self-indulgence. In writing on any subject, there is no evidence that he has ever set himself the task of ascertaining what others who have thought and written on the same subject have said and accomplished. The continuity of human effort, as it is embodied in each department of science, which ensures the handing on of the torch of truth, has never existed for him; he does not even appear to have been desirous of acquainting himself fully with the views of his intellectual peers in his own days who differed from him. He wished to think it all out for himself.

The inevitable result of such intellectual isolation is that our own thoughts obtain an undue and disproportionate value. We

have thought them out for ourselves, they are our intellectual children, and we bestow upon them all a parent's fondness. This leads to a provincialism of mind. And thus we easily slip into the kindred failing of intellectual self-indulgence, with the result that we fling down before the world thoughts which required sober and mature co-ordination within the general system of thought.

The true student cannot forego the advantages arising out of a thorough acquaintance with the best works on his subject. It is often in studying the thoughts and methods of others that we become really possessed of our own, and that they develop their intrinsic originality. On the other hand, such study may be carried too far, so as to stifle all freedom and spontaneity; learning may then supersede thought and originality. No doubt we should not wish Ruskin to have become the typical German professor, as there is no doubt that, in spite of all their shortcomings, "*Modern Painters*" and the "*Stones of Venice*" will be read by thousands when the learned works of many a writer on æsthetics and the history of art are long forgotten. But this will be not because of the actual criticism in them, not because of their scientific spirit, their philosophy or analysis; but because of the poetic insight into art which they manifest, and because of their beautiful language.

If Ruskin has not studied the thoughts of others, he has not even allowed his own thoughts to mature and to find their proper place in the general system of his subject before publishing them. He did much of his thinking in print instead of in his study; his manuscript ought to have been put by for a long time, and it would have gained much—though not in volume—from being kept. But he appears to be in love with every one of his thoughts. The result is that he revises and corrects in public his already published works: and hence we meet with frequent retractions and the candid criticism of views expressed in previous works or passages—all of which ought to have been done before they appeared in print.

This habit of intellectual self-indulgence and egotism was favored by the fatal facility and fervor of his diction, which enabled him immediately to express in perfect form, needing no alteration, the rapid thoughts or flashes of inspiration which came to him gladly like a first love and which he cherished accordingly.

On the other hand, his unfamiliarity with the work of others

and the want of critical balance and co-ordination in his own thoughts, which prevented him from seeing all sides of a question or of realizing the difference between a desirable idea and its execution in life, often produced a certain spontaneity and boldness—one might almost say, *naïveté*—in the expression of great truths. This is especially the case in his treatment of economical, social and moral questions. His powerful diction and beautiful style save such enunciations from commonplace and platitude. But his insistence upon the introduction of moral and even artistic considerations within the sphere of economics and politics, and his eloquent advocacy of their practical validity have been made by many writers from Sir Thomas More onward. The reforms of abuses in the social and moral life of the beginning of the sixteenth century in England, as advocated then, closely resembled those which Ruskin and all good people would like to see introduced in our own times. Only More was wise enough to urge them in his Utopia.

In this domain, again, the efficaciousness and influence of his views are lessened by his want of balance and moderation in expression, as well as by the one-sidedness which comes from his isolation. He shut himself up in a rural home and his own thoughts, and he could never have been in touch with the real life about him. His positive schemes and proposals thus lack the foundation of real life to give them a lasting hold upon the community; while his criticism and censure are devoid of moderation and sympathetic justice, and are all pitched in the comminatory key of the Hebrew prophets, his masters. He might have learned from the ancient Greeks, whose works he but imperfectly knew and whose genius he failed to appreciate, a little of their cardinal virtue: the love of sanity and moderation—their *Sophrosyne*. It is the fondness for prophetic preaching which runs through all his works and counteracts all healthy and noble sobriety.

Still more disturbing do these elements become when he turns to the scientific study of nature, be it geology, zoölogy or botany. His want of real preparatory study, of ordinary schooling, coupled with the inopportune intrusion of his ethical and religious bias, here lead to pronouncements which are at times childish. If he had but realized it, he would have been shocked to see that the very ethical effect of such an attitude of mind toward serious domains of study, which demand all the energies and intellectual

self-effacement of great students and great lives, is most demoralizing as regards the sense of truth—if he had but realized this, he would have been the first to condemn this manifestation of amateurishness run riot. I have on another occasion contrasted the moral effect exercised by the life-work of Charles Darwin, with its noble, almost religious, thoroughness in forming an induction, with the ready dogmatism of Carlyle and Ruskin.

From all this we turn with unalloyed pleasure to Ruskin's descriptions of nature based upon thoroughly artistic observation of her manifold forms. I have called such study by a barbarous and pedantic term, the *Phænomenology of Nature*. Of this fruitful attitude toward nature, Ruskin may almost be said to be the founder. Whatever the fondness for natural scenery among the English-speaking peoples may have been at all times, those who have read Ruskin carefully and sympathetically have turned to the clouds, the mountains and plains, the rivers and lakes, the trees, flowers and shrubs with a new power of observation, a new sense for their specific qualities, a widened and deepened appreciation and love of their every form. He has made the observation of nature a new art. Here he marks a distinct step in literature and his work will live and grow.

Hitherto, we have judged Ruskin's personality by his published work, and his works again by the standards of excellence ruling such productions in themselves. There is another point of view. We may regard him, as it were, historically, as an expression of his own times, as one of the forces which make up the intellectual current of an age.

It is here that he appears to me to be decidedly a representative figure in the intellectual movement of the latter half of the nineteenth century in England. The later Victorian era is in marked contrast—in some respects antagonism—to the earlier Victorian era. It may be called a kind of Renaissance, and it has analogies in many respects to the English Renaissance at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Like that age, it marks an effort on the side of intellectualism in its struggle with sterile and stereotyped convention and authority, coupled with effete scholasticism and low standards of living. As a reaction against the spirit of the French Revolution, and perhaps as a result of the victorious issues of the Napoleonic wars, the late Georgian and early Victorian periods developed a tone of stolid and self-satisfied conventional-

ism—Philistinism in life, in thought and in art. The reaction to which this again led in our immediate past took the form of conscious intellectualism in science, æstheticism in art and philanthropy in morals.

All these movements came into antagonism with the existing order of things. They had to struggle against the general conventionalism and conservatism of the English mind, its hatred of “new things,” of theory and thought, its sane mistrust of the doctrinaire, its deep-rooted and sincere aversion to cant and gush, with the predominance of the manly, though sometimes brutal, spirit of public-school athleticism, with the conformity of social tone in club-life, with the atmosphere of the country house and its field sports.

This spirit reigned supreme—its rule is far from having vanished in the present day—in Church and State, in the mart and in the drawing-room, nay, in the universities and the schools and museums of art.

Against this mental and moral brutality, this coarseness or stolidity, against this indifference to, or contempt of, things intellectual and artistic, there arose a phalanx of thinkers and reformers, some extreme, some moderate, reviving religion and thought, ennobling action, and proclaiming aloud the necessity to examine and to reform. They have all passed away—Stanley and Jowett, Emerson and Carlyle, Kingsley and Maurice, Darwin, Huxley, Clifford, Martineau, Matthew Arnold and Newman, George Eliot, Morris and Ruskin, the Præraphæelites, Browning and, fortunately still among us, Meredith.

In this phalanx Ruskin was a protagonist. Since the last few years, and in the immediate present, there is a lull, even a back-wave. How long will it last? Is there an Elizabethan age to follow our own?

CHARLES WALDSTEIN.